

Lesson 1 – Telephone English Phrases

First let's learn some essential telephone vocabulary, and then you'll hear examples of formal and informal telephone conversations.

There are different types of phones:

- **cell phones or mobile phones**
(a cell phone with more advanced capabilities is called a **smartphone**)



- **pay phones or public phones**



- the regular telephone you have in your house is called a **landline** - to differentiate it from a cell phone. This type of phone is called a **cordless phone** because it is not connected by a cord.



When someone calls you, the phone makes a sound – we say the phone is **ringing**. If you're available, you **pick up** the telephone or **answer** the telephone, in order to talk to the person.

If there's nobody to answer the phone, then the caller will have to leave a message on an **answering machine** or **voicemail**. Later, you can **call back** or **return the call**.

When you want to make a phone call, you start by **dialing the number**. Let's imagine that you call your friend, but she's already on the phone with someone else. You'll hear a **busy signal** - a beeping sound that tells you the other person is currently using the phone.

Sometimes, when you call a company, they put you **on hold**. This is when you wait for your call to be answered - usually while listening to music.

Finally, when you're finished with the conversation, you **hang up**.

Now you know the basic telephone vocabulary. In the next part of the lesson, you're going to hear some conversations to learn some useful English phrases for talking on the phone.

#1 – Formal Telephone Conversation

Helen: Midtown Computer Solutions, Helen speaking. How can I help you?

Ryan: Hello, this is Ryan Bardos. May I speak with Natalie Jones, please?

Helen: One moment please - I'll put you through.

Helen: Mr. Bardos? I'm sorry, Natalie's in a meeting at the moment. Would you like to leave a message?

Ryan: Yes, could you ask her to call me back as soon as possible? It's pretty urgent.

Helen: Of course. Does she have your number?

Ryan: She has my office number, but let me also give you my cell - it's 472-555-8901.

Helen: Let me read that back to you - 472-555-8901.

Ryan: That's right.

Helen: And could you spell your last name for me?

Ryan: B as in Boston - A - R - D as in dog - O - S as in September

Helen: Okay, Mr. Bardos. I'll give her the message.

Ryan: Thanks a lot. Bye.

Now let's listen to the second part of the conversation, when Natalie calls Ryan back.

Ryan: Hello?

Natalie: Hi, Ryan, this is Natalie returning your call.

Ryan: Hi Natalie, thanks for getting back to me. I was calling about the shipment of keyboards for our office - we haven't gotten them yet.

Natalie: Oh, that's not good - they were supposed to be delivered three days ago.

Ryan: Exactly, and we have a new group of employees starting on Monday, so we really need those keyboards as soon as possible.

Natalie: Okay, I'll look into it right away - if necessary, we can send you an emergency overnight shipment.

Ryan: Thanks, Natalie, I appreciate it.

Natalie: No problem, Ryan. I'll call you back a little later, as soon as I have more information.

Ryan: Sounds good – talk to you soon.

Natalie: Bye.

Telephone English Phrases – Formal Conversation

From these conversations, we can learn phrases for beginning a phone call, taking and leaving messages, checking and clarifying information, and finishing a phone call.

BEGINNING A CALL

When Helen answers the phone, she says, "Midtown Computer Solutions, Helen speaking. How can I help you?" This is a common way for a receptionist at a company or organization to answer the phone. Here are a couple alternatives:

- **"Thank you for calling Midtown Computer Solutions. How may I direct your call?"**
- **"Midtown Computer Solutions - good afternoon."**

To introduce yourself, you can say: "Hello, this is..." and if you want, you can add your company name:

- **"Hello, this is Ryan Bardos."**
- **"Hello, this is Ryan Bardos from Paramount Publishing."**

Then, ask to speak to somebody by using the phrases

- **"May I speak with...?"**
- **"Could I speak with...?"**

You can also add the phrase "I'm calling about..." or "I'm calling to..." in order to give a reason for your call. Use "I'm calling about..." to introduce a topic, and "I'm calling to..." to introduce an action:

- **"I'm calling about the job opening I saw in the newspaper."**
- **"I'm calling to register for the upcoming conference."**

To connect or transfer the call, the receptionist says, "One moment please - I'll put you through." A few other phrases for transferring a call are:

- **"Please hold."**
- **"I'll transfer you."**
- **"May I ask who's calling?" / "Who's calling, please?"**

If you forgot to identify yourself at the beginning of the call, the receptionist will sometimes use this phrase to ask for your name.

TAKING / LEAVING MESSAGES

Unfortunately the person Ryan wants to speak to is not available, and the receptionist says "I'm sorry, Natalie's in a meeting at the moment." Here are some additional phrases to use when another person can't answer a telephone call:

- **"I'm sorry, she's on another call."**

- **“I’m sorry, Natalie has left for the day.”**
- **“I’m sorry, Natalie's not in her office right now.”**
- **“I’m sorry, she's out of town at the moment.”**
- **“I’m sorry, she's not available at the moment.”**

Then, there are two common phrases that are used for offering to take a message:

- **“Would you like to leave a message?”**
- **“Can I take a message?”**

If you don’t want to leave a message, you can say:

- **“No thanks, I’ll call back later.”**

There are two polite ways to leave a message. You can make a statement starting with “Please” or a question starting with “Could you...” - usually followed by the verbs **ask**, **tell**, or **remind** and then “him” (if the message is for a man) or “her” (if the message is for a woman).

- **“Could you ask her to call me back?”**
- **“Please ask him to call me back.”**
- **“Please tell him/her that the documents are ready.”**
- **“Please remind him/her that he/she has a dentist appointment tomorrow.”**

CLARIFYING/CONFIRMING INFORMATION

While taking the message, the receptionist used two phrases for checking and confirming information:

- **“Let me read that back to you.”**
- **“Could you spell your last name for me?”**

The verb “spell” means to say the letters of the word. Ryan replies:

- **“B as in Boston - A - R - D as in dog - O - S as in September.”**

It’s common to use phrases like “B as in Boston” and “S as in September” with letters that can be frequently confused with others, such as B and D, S and F, or M and N.

FINISHING A CALL

When you want to finish the conversation, you can use “signal phrases” – these are phrases indicating that the conversation is coming to an end:

- **“Well, it was nice talking with you.”**

- “Thanks for calling.”
- “Anyway... I should let you go / I should get going.”

If you want to promise future contact, you can use one of the phrases from the second conversation:

- “I’ll get in touch in a couple of days.”
(get in touch = contact you)
- “I’ll call you back a little later”
- “Talk to you soon.”

Then you can finish the conversation with one of these “final phrases”:

- “Bye.”
 - “Take care.”
 - “Have a nice day.”
- Response: “You too. Bye.”

#2 – Informal Telephone Conversation

Let’s listen to an informal telephone conversation, after Ryan gets home from work.

Linda: Hello?

Ryan: Hi Linda, it's Ryan. How's it going?

Linda: Pretty good, thanks. How about you?

Ryan: I’m fine. Sure glad it’s Friday. Hey, is Peter there?

Linda: Yeah, hold on, I’ll get him. Peter! Ryan’s on the phone.

Peter: Hey Ryan, what’s up?

Ryan: Not much. Are you up for going fishing this weekend?

Peter: What? There’s a lot of background noise – I can barely hear you.

Ryan: Sorry about that – I’m at the train station. I was wondering if you wanted to go fishing this weekend. I’m heading up to Mountain Lake with some friends early tomorrow morning.

Peter: Uh, hang on a sec, let me just check with my wife to make sure we have no other plans.

Ryan: Sure.

Peter: Okay, she's given me the green light!

Ryan: Sweet! We'll pick you up at 6 tomorrow morning, is that OK?

Peter: Yup. Do you need directions to my place?

Ryan: Uh, you still living on Willow Street, near the community center?

Peter: Yeah, that's right. The yellow house, number 30.

Ryan: Gotcha. I know how to get there.

Peter: All right – see you tomorrow, then.

Ryan: Take care.

Peter: Bye.

Telephone English Phrases – Informal Conversation

Let's learn some of the different phrases used in an informal telephone conversation. In informal phone calls, most people answer the phone by saying "Hello?" and the introduction is also different:

- **Formal:** "Hello, this is ____."
- **Informal:** "Hi / Hey _____, it's _____."

We see two different greetings in this conversation: "How's it going?" and "What's up?" These greetings require different answers. You can answer "How's it going?" (or the similar question "How are you doing?") with:

- **"Great!"**
- **"Pretty good, thanks."**
- **"Not so good."**

And the typical answers to "What's up?" are:

- **"Not much."**
- **"Nothing much."**

The phrase "How about you?" is used to ask the same question to the other person. Notice that it is spoken like this: *"Howbout you?"*

In the formal conversation, Ryan used the phrase "May I speak with..." – but in an informal conversation, you can use these phrases:

- **"Is Peter there?"**
- **"Is Peter around?"**
- **"Can I talk to Peter?"**

If the person is not available, some informal responses are:

- **"Sorry - he's not home right now."**
- **"He's not here."**
- **"He's still at work."**
- **"He's at the gym."**

This conversation also contains some expressions for asking someone to wait:

- **"Hold on."**
- **"Hang on a sec."**
- **"Just a minute" / "Just a sec"**

The formal equivalent of these phrases would be "One moment please" or "Please hold."

At one point, Peter can't hear or understand Ryan. Here are some phrases to use if you're having difficulty hearing the other person on the phone.

- **"There's a lot of background noise - I can barely hear you."**
- **"You're breaking up. Could you call me back?"**
(breaking up = you can only hear parts of what the other person is saying)
- **"We have a bad connection."**
- **"Sorry - I didn't catch what you just said."**
- **"Could you speak a little louder?"**
(say this if the person is speaking too quietly)
- **"Could you speak a little more slowly?"**
(say this if the person is speaking too fast)
- **"What did you say?"** (informal)
- **"Could you repeat that?" / "Could you say that again?"** (more formal)

If the bad connection causes the call to fail, you can call the other person back and say this:

- **"Hi, it's Ryan again. Apparently **we got cut off.**"**

"Cut off" is a phrasal verb that means the call failed or disconnected.

Towards the end of the conversation, Ryan uses the phrase "**Gotcha**" - this is a very informal phrase that means "I understand." Another option is "**Got it.**" or "**Right.**"

Now, take the quiz to test your memory of the telephone phrases from this lesson.

Quiz - Telephone English Phrases

Question 1

"Greentree Financial Services. How may I _____ your call?"

- A. connect B. direct C. hold

Question 2

"I'm calling _____ a problem with a product I bought yesterday."

- A. about B. to C. with

Question 3

"I'm sorry, John's not in his office right now. Would you like to _____ a message?"

- A. give B. have C. leave

Question 4

"May I speak with Mrs. Black?"

"Yes, of course. Please _____."

- A. hang B. hold C. pause

Question 5

"I'm sorry, the director has _____ for the day. You can call back in the morning."

- A. left B. out C. went

Question 6

"_____, I should get going. Talk to you later."

- A. Although B. Anyway C. However

Question 7

"I'm calling _____ find out more about your English courses."

- A. about B. for C. to

Question 8

"I'll get in _____ later this week."

- A. back B. care C. touch

Question 9

"How's it going?"

- A. Great! B. Nothing much. C. Take care!

Question 10

"Hey Bob, is Karen _____?"

- A. here B. present C. there

Question 11

"Actually, she's still at _____. You can call her at the office."

- A. job B. occupation C. work

Question 12

"We have a bad connection. You're _____ up."

- A. breaking B. catching C. speaking

Question 13

"_____ did you say?"

- A. How B. What C. Which

Question 14

"Could you speak a little _____?"

- A. louder B. noisier C. stronger

Question 15

"Can I talk to Henry?"

"Sure - just a _____."

- A. bit B. min C. sec

Answers on the next page

QUIZ ANSWERS

1.B 2.A 3.C 4.B 5.A 6.B 7.C 8.C 9.A 10.C 11.C 12.A 13.B 14.A 15.C

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